

American Library Association

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Source: *American Libraries*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (Sep., 1997), p. 38

Published by: American Library Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25634617>

Accessed: 29-01-2016 20:30 UTC

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On My Mind

Is Bill Gates the New Andrew Carnegie?

By Patricia Martin

Encouraging wealthy persons and corporations to share their largesse with libraries was once my professional duty—when I worked for the Fund for America's Libraries. So, of course, I applaud Bill and Melinda Gates's generous gesture of \$200 million in cash, matched by Microsoft's \$200 million in software for libraries (*AL*, Aug., p. 14–15). As a result of this gift, Bill Gates is being hailed as the new Andrew Carnegie, whose donations to libraries would be valued at over \$500 million in today's dollars. There is some value in that comparison, since it illuminates how times have changed—and yet stayed the same.

Much like Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates first studied the public library as an idea before making his investment. He sent his people and resources out into the field to learn how libraries operate. This research phase constituted the Libraries Online program that ALA codeveloped with Microsoft.

All guts, no glory

Designed as a program to help close the gap between the information haves and have-nots, Libraries Online taught everyone involved that bringing financial resources and high-tech solutions to rural and underdeveloped communities is hard, frustrating work. Worse, it's all guts and no glory. Using new technologies to enable have-not communities no doubt offers powerful gratification of Peace Corps dimensions, but the media and influential government leaders pay little attention to it. Serving the disadvantaged in small towns and rural regions reflects a truly philanthropic streak in Bill Gates that one looks forward to following in the coming months.

In fact, it will be interesting to see if the Gates Library Foundation takes a more traditional approach to its giving practices, or opts for a more contemporary style of "strategic philanthropy" in which a company's charitable arm

strives to get a return on its gift giving by driving positive media attention, government affairs, or VIP hospitality. For example, Mobil supports the PBS's *Mystery* series because it's a favorite among legislators, and petroleum is a highly regulated industry. The John Hancock Company supports the Boston Police youth initiative, which has virtually snuffed out the handgun deaths among youngsters because promoting safety is the right image for an insurance firm. Financial services companies give to museums and orchestras in part because the perks they receive in return make for impressive client entertainment.

Leaving a library legacy

It is not apparent whether Andrew Carnegie was being strategic as a businessman when he gave the money to build libraries. Social history suggests he, like many philanthropists of his era, was more interested in building a legacy from which future generations would benefit.

In today's information revolution, a legacy is achieved by touching people with information that changes their lives at the moment. Microsoft's Libraries Online is a New Age legacy. The lives of patrons who sit at computer terminals and search for jobs, obtain social service information, and do homework are changed for the better as they learn to navigate the world's most popular software.

Although Carnegie donated cash to build libraries, he didn't donate the steel to construct them. The product-plus-cash approach is a more recent phenomenon in corporate philanthropy, and it's especially popular with computing companies. It is only natural for the people who have invested their days and nights and creative juices into developing the technology that has been like rocket fuel for the economy, to believe that software rules. What could be more valuable?

From a purely promotional standpoint, companies pay handsome fees to established events and prestigious programs such as the Olympics, the park system, and museums to place their products before potential users to sample, learn from, and someday pur-

chase. This is not sinister manipulation, but it is marketing, pure and simple. A company with a complicated product must help people learn how to use it. The smartest marketers find the most meaningful and legitimate vehicles to help consumers master an unfamiliar product.

Opportunities knock

Two-hundred million in cash is a big deal. Libraries deserve this kind of generosity. Until the Gates Library Foundation disseminates its guidelines and funding priorities, all the library community can do is imagine the impact this contribution will have on libraries and anticipate the opportunities it will offer.

For one, libraries can repeat the good lessons learned from Andrew Carnegie by advocating that local dollars be used to maintain the headway gained by the new technology and cash given by the Gates Library Foundation. Carnegie agreed to build the libraries; communities agreed to pay operating costs, which were committed before ground was broken. That's a public/private model worth revisiting.

Next, the Fund for America's Libraries can assert leadership to help the libraries that will be the recipients of this largesse. Except for the large, urban systems, few public libraries have trained development officers prepared to deal with this style of philanthropy or the additional giving it is likely to generate. For example, the initial investment to put a computer lab in one library in Brooklyn as part of Libraries Online spurred a further commitment to spend \$4 million to add computers in all 59 branches.

Finally, ALA, as the focal point of the library profession, can open discussion about this initiative to help libraries make the most of it. Librarians have a knack for collaborating with colleagues, sharing information, and setting best practices. The Gates Library Foundation intends to "provide funding for several thousand libraries in the U.S. and Canada." It seems that an initiative of this magnitude could do with some guidance from the library community; and from all accounts, the Gates Library Foundation seems poised to hear it. ♦

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